

Marcella Sembrich

the
Victor
recordings
(1908~19)



CD I (64:37)

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| 1 | RIGOLETTO: Bella figlia dell'amore (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
with Enrico Caruso, <i>tenor</i> , Gina Severina, <i>mezzo-soprano</i> , and Antonio Scotti, <i>baritone</i>
7 ii 1908; C 5053-3 (Victor 96001) | 3:57 |
| 2 | LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR: Chi mi frena in tal momento (Donizetti) <i>It.</i>
with Enrico Caruso, <i>tenor</i> , Gina Severina, <i>mezzo-soprano</i> , Francesco Daddi, <i>tenor</i> ,
Antonio Scotti, <i>baritone</i> , and Marcel Journet, <i>bass</i>
7 ii 1908; C 5052-4 (Victor 96200) | 4:01 |
| 3 | SEMIRAMIDE: Bel raggio lusinghier (Rossini) <i>It.</i>
2 xi 1908; C 6573-1 (Victor 88141) | 4:03 |
| 4 | LINDA DI CHAMOUNIX: O luce di quest'anima (Donizetti) <i>It.</i>
2 xi 1908; C 6574-1 (Victor 88142) | 3:00 |
| 5 | I VESPRI SICILIANI: Mercè, dilette amiche (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
2 xi 1908; C 6575-1 (Victor 88143) | 3:33 |
| 6 | DIE LUSTIGE WITWE: Dolce amor (Lehár) <i>It.</i>
2 xi 1908; C 5044-4 (Victor 88107) | 4:10 |
| 7 | ERNANI: Ernani, involami (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
3 xi 1908; C 3155-3 (Victor 88022) | 3:36 |
| 8 | LA TRAVIATA: Ah, fors' è lui... Sempre libera (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
3 xi 1908; C 3152-4 (Victor 88018) | 4:12 |
| 9 | RIGOLETTO: Tutte le feste al tempio... Sì, vendetta (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
with Mario Sammarco, <i>baritone</i>
26 iii 1910; C 8755-2 (Victor 89042) | 4:34 |

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| 10 | Storielle del bosco Viennese (Johann Strauss Jr.; arr. LaForge) <i>It.</i>
13 x 1910; C 9557-2 (unpublished on Victor) | 4:38 |
| 11 | BARBARILLO DE LAVAPIES: Lo que está de Dios 'Romanza' (Barbieri) <i>Sp.</i>
13 x 1910; C 9558-2 (unpublished on Victor) | 3:55 |
| 12 | När jag blef sjutton år [When I Was Seventeen] (Lillejebjörn) <i>Sw.</i>
13 x 1910; C 9559-2 (unpublished on Victor) | 3:38 |
| 13 | Storielle del bosco Viennese (Johann Strauss Jr.; arr. LaForge) <i>It.</i>
1 x 1912; C 12441-1 (Victor 88388) | 4:30 |
| 14 | DOLLAR PRINCESS: Waltz (Fall) <i>It.</i>
3 x 1912; C 12440-3 (Victor 88387) | 4:00 |
| 15 | WALTZ DREAM: Non sai mia bella (Oscar Strauss) <i>It.</i>
4 x 1912; C 12456-2 (Victor 88389) | 4:40 |
| 16 | Comin' Thro' the Rye (traditional) <i>Eng.</i>
4 x 1912; C 12474-1 (Victor 88390) | 3:16 |

CD 2 (75:49)

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| 1 | Spring Song [Frühlingslied] (Heine – Rubinstein) <i>Eng.</i> | 1:24 |
| 2 | Ouvre tes yeux bleus (Massenet) <i>Fr.</i>
3 vi 1919; B 22795-1 (unpublished on Victor) | 1:55 |
| 3 | Consecration (Manney) <i>Eng.</i>
3 vi 1919; B 22796-1 (unpublished on Victor) | 2:03 |
| 4 | Consecration (Manney) <i>Eng.</i>
3 vi 1919; B 22796-2 (unpublished on Victor) | 2:05 |

5	I Heard a Cry (Sara Teasdale – William Arms Fisher) <i>Eng.</i> 3 vi 1919; B 22797-1 (unpublished on Victor)	1:40
	Two Little Songs of the Months (Stebbins) <i>Eng.</i> 3 vi 1919; B 22798-1 (unpublished on Victor)	
6	The Longest Day is in June	1:07
7	If the Apples Bloom	:54
8	Now Shines the Dew, op.72 no.1 (Rubinstein) <i>Eng.</i> 3 vi 1919; B 22799-1 (unpublished on Victor)	2:44
9	Pretty Polly Oliver (arr. Fisher) <i>Eng.</i> 3 vi 1919; B 22900-1 (unpublished on Victor)	3:14
10	Consecration (Manney) <i>Eng.</i> 6 vi 1919; B 22796-3 (unpublished on Victor)	2:04
11	Consecration (Manney) <i>Eng.</i> 6 vi 1919; B 22796-4 (unpublished on Victor)	1:59
12	Consecration (Manney) <i>Eng.</i> 6 vi 1919; B 22796-5 (unpublished on Victor)	1:57
13	I Heard a Cry (Sara Teasdale – William Arms Fisher) <i>Eng.</i> 6 vi 1919; B 22797-2 (unpublished on Victor)	1:35
14	I Heard a Cry (Sara Teasdale – William Arms Fisher) <i>Eng.</i> 6 vi 1919; B 22797-3 (unpublished on Victor)	1:36
	Two Little Songs of the Months (Stebbins) <i>Eng.</i> 6 vi 1919; B 22798-2 (unpublished on Victor)	
15	The Longest Day is in June	1:02
16	If the Apples Bloom	:53

Two Little Songs of the Months (Stebbins) *Eng.*

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| 17 | 6 vi 1919; B 22798-3 (unpublished on Victor) | |
| | The Longest Day is in June | 1:05 |
| 18 | If the Apples Bloom | :53 |
| 19 | Now Shines the Dew, op.72 no.1 (Rubinstein) <i>Eng.</i> | 2:39 |
| | 6 vi 1919; B 22799-2 (unpublished on Victor) | |
| 20 | Now Shines the Dew, op.72 no.1 (Rubinstein) <i>Eng.</i> | 2:37 |
| | 6 vi 1919; B 22799-3 (unpublished on Victor) | |
| 21 | Ouvre tes yeux bleus (Massenet) <i>Fr.</i> | 1:45 |
| 22 | To a Messenger (LaForge) <i>Eng.</i> | 1:20 |
| | 6 vi 1919; C 22906-1 (unpublished on Victor) | |
| 23 | Ouvre tes yeux bleus (Massenet) <i>Fr.</i> | 1:44 |
| 24 | To a Messenger (LaForge) <i>Eng.</i> | 1:20 |
| | 6 vi 1919; C 22906-2 (unpublished on Victor) | |
| 25 | Moja Pieszczotka [My Own Sweet Maiden], op.18 no.3 (Paderewski) <i>Pol.</i> | 1:52 |
| | 6 vi 1919; B 22907-1 (unpublished on Victor) | |

APPENDIX

The Bettini Cylinder

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| 26 | Voci di primavera (Johann Strauss Jr.) <i>It.</i> | 1:52 |
| | ca. 1900 | |

The Mapleson Cylinders

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| 27 | Voci di primavera: cadenza excerpt (Johann Strauss Jr.) <i>It.</i> | :55 |
| | 30 or 31 iii 1900 | |

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| 28 | IL FLAUTO MAGICO [DIE ZAUBERFLÖTE]: <i>Non osi esser crudel</i> (Mozart) <i>It.</i>
27 i 1902 | 1:36 |
| 29 | LA TRAVIATA: <i>Sempre libera</i> (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
with Carlo Dani, <i>tenor</i>
27 ii 1902 | 1:55 |
| 30 | LA FILLE DU RÉGIMENT: <i>À cet aveu si tendre, mon cœur</i> (Donizetti) <i>It.</i>
with Thomas Salignac, <i>tenor</i>
30 i 1903 | 1:05 |
| 31 | <i>Parla</i> (Arditi) <i>It.</i>
30 i 1903 | :56 |
| 32 | LA FILLE DU RÉGIMENT: <i>Rataplan</i> (Donizetti) <i>It.</i>
with Marie van Cauteren, <i>contralto</i> and Charles Gilibert, <i>baritone</i>
30 i 1903 | 1:18 |
| 33 | ERNANI: <i>O sommo Carlo</i> (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
with Mathilde Bauermeister, <i>contralto</i> , Emilio De Marchi, <i>tenor</i> , Roberto Vanni, <i>tenor</i> ,
Antonio Scotti, <i>baritone</i> , Bernard Bégué, <i>baritone</i> , and Edouard de Reszke, <i>bass</i>
i/ii 1903 | 2:00 |
| 34 | ERNANI: <i>O sommo Carlo</i> (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
with Mathilde Bauermeister, <i>contralto</i> , Emilio De Marchi, <i>tenor</i> , Roberto Vanni, <i>tenor</i> ,
Antonio Scotti, <i>baritone</i> , Bernard Bégué, <i>baritone</i> , and Edouard de Reszke, <i>bass</i>
i/ii 1903 | 1:50 |

The 1903 Columbia 'Grand Opera' Recordings

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| 35 | ERNANI: <i>Ernani involami</i> (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
1903; take I (1364) | 3:10 |
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| 36 | ERNANI: <i>Ernani involami</i> (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
1903; take 2 (I364) | 2:39 |
| 37 | Voci di primavera (Johann Strauss Jr.) <i>It.</i>
1903; take 1 (I365) | 2:40 |
| 38 | Voci di primavera (Johann Strauss Jr.) <i>It.</i>
1903; take 2 (I365) | 2:36 |
| 39 | LA TRAVIATA: <i>Ah, fors' è lui</i> (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
1903; take 1 (I366) | 2:53 |
| 40 | LA TRAVIATA: <i>Ah, fors' è lui</i> (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
1903; take 2 (I366) | 2:38 |

CD 1: tracks 1 - 16 with the Victor Orchestra

CD 2: tracks 1 - 25 with Frank La Forge, pianist; track 28 with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra conducted by Walter Damrosch; tracks 29, 33 & 34 with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra conducted by Luigi Mancinelli; tracks 30 - 32 with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra conducted by Philippe Flon; tracks 35 - 40 with Charles Adam Prince, pianist

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Of all the operatic legends performing at the turn of the century, the Polish coloratura soprano, Marcella Sembrich (1858-1935) seemed most willing to cooperate with experimental efforts to record her voice. Several of these exceedingly rare cylinders succeeded in capturing Sembrich's brilliant virtuosic singing, which draws forth immediate associations with a distant era of bel canto opera and performances at fashionable salons.

By the end of the 19th century various amateurs were curious and enthusiastic about the new medium and were anxious to test its possibilities. Among the most creative were Lieutenant Gianni Bettini, who had experimented with and improved existing recording apparatus, and Lionel Mapleson, the Librarian of the Metropolitan Opera Company. Bettini used his society connections to persuade various singers to record for him, and beginning in 1899 published catalogues listing available

recordings. Early in 1900, Mapleson bought an Edison 'Home' phonograph and was given a Bettini recorder and reproducer by the cellist Leo Stern and his wife, soprano Suzanne Adams. Mapleson actually brought his cylinder machine into the prompter's box at the Met and proceeded to record brief selections from live performances during the 1900-1901 season. He continued this practice for two more seasons, using a larger recording horn from another position high above the stage.

A Bettini cylinder of Sembrich singing the first part of Johann Strauss's 'Voci di Primavera' was discovered in a hotel loft in New Zealand. It is believed to have been recorded in his

New York laboratories in 1900. Notwithstanding certain technical defects that cause an odd bubbling sound at times, the recording is clear and the sound resonates in a highly reverberant chamber. In this bravura display piece the timbre of Sembrich's voice sounds somewhat darker than it did on later



Sembrich as Mimì

recordings, but her dazzling *fioriture* are secure and radiant.

The Mapleson cylinders include excerpts of Sembrich singing from Verdi's *Ernani* and *Traviata*, Mozart's *Zauberflöte*, and Donizetti's *Fille du Régiment*, as well as Arditi's 'Parla', and again, Strauss's 'Voci di Primavera'. The Strauss song represented one of Mapleson's first experiments since it was recorded about ten days after he purchased his machine. The recording is remarkably clear and Sembrich's voice is very forward. Singing without accompaniment Sembrich is always on pitch, demonstrating her phenomenal technical skill and musicality as she soars and trills her way through space at the conclusion of the waltz.

The operatic excerpts were made in 1902-03 and add another dimension as we hear Sembrich in the spacious hall, singing with a full orchestra and chorus. Whether alone or with others, Sembrich's voice has a

bright penetrative focus. A particularly idiosyncratic characteristic of her singing is the way she attacks a phrase. Her voice seems to spring forward with unusual vitality. As she ascends the scale it opens and gains in volume and fullness. Neither the orchestra nor other

singers ever drown her out. At times on the commercial recordings this attack seems over-emphatic, but on the Maplesons it seems effective, propelling her tones into the opera house.

Early in 1902 Mapleson caught Sembrich at the conclusion of the Queen of the Night's 2nd act aria, 'Der Hölle Rache'. Taken at a fast pace, Sembrich's staccati sparkle, and she lifts the roof of the opera house with an

enormous high D at the end. In 1903 the great ensemble 'O sommo Carlo' at the end of Act 3 of *Ernani* found Sembrich and the tenor Emilio De Marchi soaring rhythmically over chorus and orchestra. The excerpt from 'Sempre Libera' is also breathtaking. Violetta was one of Sembrich's great rôles, and the



Sembrich as Mignon

reason for that is clear as she sweeps aside any difficulties and emotionally projects Violetta's excitement through the music. Her Alfredo was the lyric tenor, Carlo Dani.

Also in 1903 Mapleson recorded Sembrich in two excerpts from *Fille du Régiment*.

When the opera had its Metropolitan première in 1902, Sembrich was a great success, and became noted for her ability as a comedienne. The recordings present Sembrich in duets with the tenor Thomas Salignac and the baritone Charles Gilibert. These brief glimpses reveal Sembrich having a very good time with Donizetti's charming and bouncy vocal line. Sembrich was said to conclude the opera with a performance of Arditi's waltz song, 'Parla'. Mapleson caught the end of this famous bravura piece and Sembrich is heard in a brilliant exchange with the orchestra, clearly in control, finally soaring to a high D.

These cylinders are remarkable documents. It was years before commercial

recordings attempted anything close to what Mapleson naïvely managed to do in those three years. Imagine, live recordings in the opera house, with full orchestra and chorus! With all their aural difficulties, these cylinders give us an incredible glimpse into the past.



Sembrich as Hanna

Particularly with Marcella Sembrich, they give us a sense of what she actually must have sounded like. While her vibrant voice had a flute-like brilliance and was projected in an instrumental manner, it clearly had a dramatic impact in the opera house.

Marcella Sembrich (née Praxede Marcelline Kochanska) had lived and breathed music from early childhood, becoming a superb pianist and violinist by her early teens. She continued to perform on these instruments at benefit concerts during her career. Her father was her first teacher in the village of Wisniewczyk, and she entered the nearby Lemberg conservatory at the age of eleven. Her piano teacher at the conservatory was Wilhelm Stengel who became her

husband in 1877. She continued her studies in Vienna and at the age of 17 began her vocal training with the noted basso Viktor von Rokitsky. Over the next few years she studied intermittently in Milan with both the younger and elder Lamperti.

In 1877 Sembrich made her operatic début in Athens as Elvira in *Puritani*, followed by performances of *Lucia* and *Dinorah*. She joined the Dresden Royal Opera in 1878 and remained for two years. During this time she performed as a guest artist in Milan, Vienna and Warsaw, and also in Leipzig under Johannes Brahms. After her 1880 London début at Covent Garden as Lucia, she was hailed as a worthy rival to the two reigning divas, Adelina Patti and Emma Albani. She sang at Covent Garden for four years, during which time her repertoire expanded to include Gilda and Violetta.

Sembrich created a sensation at her Metropolitan Opera début in 1883 as Lucia on the second night of its inaugural

season. Sembrich sang more than 50 performances, including the tour. While she did not return to the Met for almost 15 years, her international career had taken off. She was in demand throughout the world, singing as a guest artist in Russia, Paris, Vienna, Lisbon, Berlin, Warsaw and Brussels.

She returned to Covent Garden in 1895 and the Met in 1898. Sembrich retired from the stage in 1909, but continued to concertise until 1917.

Comparing the recordings of Marcella Sembrich and Nellie Melba, the critic Herman Klein noted 'the clarity of Sembrich's tone, the ease with which she executed her *fioriture*, the richer timbre of her voice compared with the

silvery quality of Melba's'. Klein was not depending on the recordings alone when he wrote these remarks in 1924; he knew both sopranos well and had heard them many times in the theatre. He went on to compare Sembrich with Adelina Patti, pointing out '...Sembrich's admirable breathing, in which,



Sembrich as Marie

as in the unusually rich quality of her 'dark' tone, she always reminds me of her acknowledged model, the far-famed Adelina'. These remarks would lead us to expect a dark, velvety sound from Sembrich's recordings. Actually her voice is perched high and forward. On the commercial recordings her dramatic projection and expressiveness, rather than her timbre, separate her from Melba and bring her closer to Patti.

The famous 'Grand Opera Series' released by the Columbia Phonograph Company in 1903 featured Marcella Sembrich. These recordings have always been disappointing. The difficulties Sembrich experienced seemed to stem from the inexperience of the unknown recordist who was constantly experimenting; and a clumsy accompanist, Charles Adams Prince. Sembrich and Prince often can't get together on rhythm or tempo, and he seems especially insensitive to dynamics. The first take of 'Ernani, involami' is 32 seconds longer than the

second. At one point Sembrich seems about to stop from frustration. By the second take they have at least agreed on tempo. At the beginning of 'Ah, fors' é lui' Violetta's dreamy reverie is disturbed by Prince's loud thumping chords. Clearly there was virtually no rehearsal

or testing prior to the recording sessions, and the results show it. But these were to be the first commercial celebrity recordings to be released in the United States, and Columbia was out to win a race with the Victor Talking Machine Company.

The first solo recording on this volume is the 1908 Victor recording of 'Bel raggio' from Rossini's *Semiramide*. When Sembrich recorded the aria,



Sembrich as Dinorah

it was primarily a concert piece since the opera was thought to be a relic of the distant past. Dame Joan Sutherland and Marilyn Horne changed all that, and I have seen the opera numerous times. But I never heard the aria performed with such a combination of melting legato and brilliant ornamentation. Sembrich

continues to radiate her unique charm in 'O luce di quest'anima' from *Linda di Chamounix* with a remarkable vocal display, ending on a vibrant high C. Amazingly, both these records were made one year before she retired from the operatic stage at the age of 51. Sembrich must have been difficult to record. There were always many takes before a successful recording was produced, and numerous recordings were never released.

It was as a teacher that Marcella Sembrich made her final contributions to music. She was director of vocal studies at both the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia and at the Juilliard School in New York for many years.

Among her students were Hulda Lashanska, Alma Gluck, Dusolina Giannini, Maria Jeritza, and Queena Mario. It was undoubtedly for her students and friends that she recorded

some songs with her accompanist, Frank La Forge, for private distribution in 1919. Alma Gluck's daughter, Marcia Davenport, described Sembrich's voice as 'frail and reedy' at around this time. At 61, her voice naturally sounds more fragile, but her intensity and expressive grasp of every dramatic and musical nuance remain unimpaired. C. F. Manney's 'Consecration' is given an especially lovely reading, and it is fascinating to be able to compare all six takes.

Marcella Sembrich has left us a memorable inheritance in her numerous recordings. She was one of the first celebrities to recognise the potential of the new medium as an archive of the vocal art of

her time. Coming from the Romantic tradition of Brahms, Liszt, Chopin, and Schumann, she was a musician first, a 'prima donna' second.



Sembrich as Norina



Sembrich as Gilda

photograph overleaf:

*standing (back row): Ugo Ara, Leopold Godowsky, Iwan D'Archambeau,
Arthur Hinton, Alfred Pochon, Siegmund Stojowski, Rudolf Ganz*

*standing (centre row): Adolfo Betti, Osip Gabrilowitsch, Edward De Coppet,
Fritz Kreisler, Marcella Sembrich, Ignaz Paderewski*

*seated (front row): Alma Gluck, Wilhelm Stengel, Mme Kreisler, Efrem Zimbalist,
Pablo Casals, Susie Metcalf (Mme Casals), Catherine Goodson*

